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ABSTRACT

Only by examining the motion picture as a mass medium, shaped and defined within a specific socio-cultural period in history, can we increase our understanding of the function and contribution of this entertainment form. This paper offers several suggestions for further research into early motion picture history. One glaring deficiency among almost all the early film historians was their lack of interest in the impact of the movies on the new audience. Film historians need to examine primary material such as social workers' reports and records, church publications, and personal diaries. A second area of research is the geographic diffusion of the first movie houses, which can also provide important data for those interested in the history of urban growth and development. Another area of research involves the forerunners of the conventional movie house, especially touring exhibits and travelling projectionists. A final area of research would include applying the technique of content analysis to a comprehensive study of early film content. This paper concludes that continued development of film history depends on making it an academic endeavor with validity and relevance. (TS)

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SUGGESTIONS FOR

EARLY MOTION PICTURE RESEARCH

by

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SUGGESTIONS FOR

EARLY MOTION PICTURE RESEARCH

It is quite obvious that motion picture research has reached a crossroads. While there has been a welcomed increase in the attention paid to the movies in academic and non-academic circles in recent years, nevertheless, the continued emphasis on the examination of the movies as an art form, ignoring the fact that they were also a potent form of mass communication, still leaves significant lacunae in our knowledge of film history. Only by examining the motion picture as a mass medium, shaped and defined within a specific socio-cultural period in history, can we increase our understanding of the function and contribution of this entertainment form. This is not to suggest that we should ignore the study of style and genre, but to continue to do so in a socio-historical vacuum will not advance the development of film studies much beyond the point we have reached today.

Film historian Raymond Fielding once noted that, "we begin by conceding that we know more about the Greco-Roman civilizations of antiquity than we do about the first fifteen years of the motion picture."[1] While it is well established that mankind had long derived much pleasure from various forms of visual entertainment and stimulation, the introduction of the motion picture into American society in the latter part of the 19th century was nevertheless a unique historical phenomenon. The important question is what set of conditions -- social,cultural or economic -- encouraged and facilitated the development, perfection and public acceptance of the motion picture at this specific point in American history? We still know very little about the interrelationship between these conditions and the factors which favored or hindered innovation and acceptance of this new medium.[2]

Many of the film historian's difficulties, especially in the United States, arise because of the "spotty" origins of the movie industry itself. While the records of the Edison Company have been extensively researched, there are few other comparable sources in existence.[3] This makes it almost impossible to develop a comprehensive historical picture of the diffusion of the new entertainment across the country without extensive examination of local records -- an historical methodology which few historians seem anxious to undertake. This problem is further compounded by the fact that the motion picture industry has never shown much interest in developing its own history, the establishment of the AFI notwithstanding. To my knowledge no film company has ever commissioned a full-scale history of itself, similar to many which have been undertaked by professional historians for brewing companies, railroads or even the telephone company. Instead we have had to rely upon a few individual histories of the American cinema which vary widely in quality, and which are shot through with conjecture, anecdote and personal bias.[4] Because of our reliance upon such works as Ramsaye, Hampton, MacGowan and others, film historians have had a difficult time sorting out fact from myth; while many of the more blatant misinterpretations have become part of the accepted narrative of American film lore.

FRUITFUL AREAS OF RESEARCH

There are several areas of research in early motion picture history which are deserving of further attention. Each of these areas has barely been touched, and a great deal of useful data can be obtained by the diligent researcher willing to examine primary (and even secondary) sources not normally associated with motion picture research. What follows are a few suggestions for further study.

I. The Early Movie Audience:

One glaring deficiency among almost all the early film historians was their lack of interest in the 'impact' of the movies on the new audience. While they do discuss specific films having had an "influence," (such as The Great Thaw Trial and The Birth of a Nation), they seldom venture into the sociological or psychological realm to try and assess the nature of the changes which the introduction of the movies caused in the American social infrastructure. The early film psychologists such as Hugo Munsterberg and G. Fort Buckle are almost totally ignored, while the work of sociologists such as Donald Ramsey Young and Paul G. Cressey are also forgotten.[5] As a result, American film history as a whole has suffered from a lack of knowledge about the attitudes and composition of early film audiences, and about the nature and importance of the influence which the movies had on their lives.

Elsewhere I have attempted an initial examination of the composition of early film audiences.[6] But my own research has only served to indicate how little we do know about that vast group of people from all segments of society who helped to make the movies the most popular entertainment form in the world by 1912. We need to know more about who they were; what special attractions did the screen hold for them; and what, in turn, they took away from the nickelodeons in the form of socializing behavior.

It is now safe to discount as myth that the working class, especially the immigrant group, entirely made up the first movie audiences. While this segment of urban society was certainly numerically important, other groups, notably the middle class devotees of the melodrama and cheap live theater, were equally important in providing

a solid audience base from which the industry could grow. The important work of Nicholas Vardac and John L. Fell has demonstrated the direct line of influence of the theatrical contrivances of the 19th century on the content of early motion pictures.[7] Other historians of the theater have also indicated the switch of allegiance which caused so much consternation to theater and vaudeville managers, and the resultant demise of both cheap theater and the melodrama.[8]

And yet, we know so little of the movie audience, particularly that important working-class segment. What were their thoughts about what they saw on the screen? Did they utilize the movies entirely as leisure, or were they also seeking a "guide" to acceptable social behavior in their new urban surroundings? (Albert F. McLean has demonstrated that vaudeville certainly was an agent of socialization for the immigrant.[9] If vaudeville, then why not the motion picture?) In order to provide the answers to these and other similar questions, film historians need to spend a lot more time going through primary material such as social workers' reports and records, church publications, social club records, personal diaries and even periodical accounts of the "new miracle" -- the moving picture.[10]

Further clues to public perceptions of the enormous socializing influence of the medium can be obtained from educational publications, or material dealing with criminal behavior. (An examination of the first edition of William Healy's seminal book on juvenile delinquency -- The Individual Delinquent, 1916 -- provides an interesting and frightening view of the accepted "scientific" misperception of movie influence).[11] Similarly, the Annual Proceedings of organizations such as the National

Education Association and the Child Welfare Conference provide rich sources of material related to the perceived function and influence of the movies within the community. It was precisely this threat of the motion picture as a counter productive or anti-social educational influence which alarmed so many of the "progressive" educationists at the turn of the century.

By a careful sifting and examination of the largely forgotten or ignored material, we can begin to build a much more accurate portrait of the first movie audiences, and this cannot but help our understanding of the appeal of certain types of early film content. It will also allow film historians to develop a long-term view of the changing composition of film audiences, and the relationship this had to variations in film content and style. The ultimate goal would be, of course, to establish a workable theory concerning the triadic relationship between the nature of the audience, the historio-cultural context, and the changing content of motion pictures.

II. The Diffusion of Movie Houses:

It may seem esoteric to be concerned about the location of the first movie houses, but a careful examination of the geographic diffusion of these new foci of amusement can provide important data of use not only to film scholars, but also to those interested in the history of urban growth and development.[12] Recently the work of film historian Russell Merritt in this area has helped us to understand the process by which the nickelodeon gradually shifted into middle-class neighborhoods, in many cases only after long battles with local councils afraid of what they would bring in their wake. Merritt has also noted that the entire structure of the early motion picture industry, both producers and exhibitors, were

anxious to become a more middle-class entertainment.[13] As a point of interest, a comparison of the location of early movie houses in European cities such as Paris shows a somewhat different spatial pattern of location in middle-class districts, indicating that the middle-class customer was a patron of the French cinema from the very first.

The nickelodeon was an important phenomenon in the burgeoning urban scene of the early 20th century, and the analysis of their location in proximity to various types of neighborhoods, modes of transportation, and other commercial amusements, especially saloons, could be of immense benefit to urban historians. It would also contribute to our knowledge of the early film audience. Here too, a substantial amount of primary research is required, i.e. searches through municipal records which would indicate the granting of licenses or even checking through old newspapers for addresses in advertisements. The difficulty here is that it was not until after 1912 that most American cities began to create specific municipal ordinances to deal with movie houses.[14] Thus the search for licenses for early nickelodeons would more than likely entail an examination of records for general places of amusement. Second, most nickelodeons did not start to advertise in the newspapers until after 1908.[15] Nevertheless, these are not insurmountable research problems given the time and the effort.

III. The Structure of the Early Motion Picture Industry:

While we are beginning to learn something about the structure of the motion picture industry during its first years, there is still much to be done. Thanks to the work of researchers such as Timothy Lyons in his study of the American Film Manufacturing Company,[16] and Gordon Hendrick's work on the Kinetoscope and Biograph, certain patterns of

operation are emerging. What are now required are more such micro-studies of film producing companies, distributors and exhibitors. Surely some of these records must still be in existence?

It would also be of interest to know more about the forerunners of the conventional movie house. As an example, we have Raymond Fielding's excellent and comprehensive examination of that phenomenon -- Hale's Tours -- which captivated so many Americans in the period before 1910. Fielding has pointed out that Hale's Tours served to introduce and popularize the early projected motion picture, and bridged the gap between primitive arcade peep shows and vaudeville presentations with the regular movie theaters which spread across the country between 1905 and 1910.[17] What also of the intinerant lanternists -- what type of influence did they have on 19th century audiences? Little has been written on this subject. Similarly, we know that travelling projectionists were important figures in the early development of the motion picture industry, yet little systematic research has been undertaken on this subject. Again, we have some evidence that a search through local records, especially newspapers, can reveal much about the pattern in which moving pictures were first exhibited in smaller communities. A series of such localized studies clustered, for example, in the New England states would allow historians to reconstruct not only the routes which such touring exhibits took, but also their public reception and the content of the films they showed to a curious audience.[18]

IV. Content Analysis:

Finally, I would briefly like to draw attention to the myriad

possibilities available to researchers in applying the techniques of content analysis to a comprehensive study of early film content.[19] Now that the American Film Institute's cataloging efforts are available, anyone interested in this area will soon be able to undertake content analyses much more comprehensive and meaningful than hitherto possible. The range of important questions to be answered is enormous, and would cover topics such as, the relationship between movie themes and historical reality; or specific concerns of certain segments of society and their reflection in film content. Also, what were the historical factors influencing the nature of content at any one time? (Lewis Jacobs suggests that early films ignored social problems -- is this, in fact, true?) Perhaps we could even answer some of the contentious questions about exactly who these early films were aimed at -- the working-class or the middle-class?

While this paper is by no means an exhaustive list of research opportunities, I have tried to show that film historians (and all social and cultural historians for that matter) should pay much more attention to the audience and the historical environment than has been the case in the past. The continued development of film history depends on making it an academic endeavour with validity and relevance, and this can only be achieved if we can show the importance of this medium in shaping the lives and ideas of Americans in the last eighty years.

ENDNOTES

[1]Raymond Fielding, A Technological History of Motion Pictures and Television (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 1.

[2]The concepts of innovation and acceptance are discussed in detail in Homer G. Barnett, Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1953). It is important to note that innovation and acceptance are not the same thing.

[3]See Gordon Hendricks, The Edison Motion Picture Myth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

[4]The major histories I have in mind are: Terry Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926); Benjamin Hampton, A History of the Movies (New York: Covici-Friede Publishers, 1931); and Kenneth MacGowan, Behind the Screen (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1965). Perhaps the worst example of unsubstantiated history is Gertrude Jobes, Motion Picture Empire (Hamden, Conn: Archan Books, 1966). I do not include Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1939) in this category.

[5]Hugo Munsterberg, The Photoplay: A Psychological Study (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916); Gerard Fort Buckle, The Mind and the Film (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1926); Donald Ramsey Young, Motion Pictures: A Study in Social Legislation (Philadelphia: Westbrook Publishing Co., 1922); and Paul G. Cressey, "The Motion Picture as Informal Education," Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 7, 1934, pp. 504-515.

[6]Garth S. Jowett, "The First Motion Picture Audiences," The Journal of Popular Film, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1974, pp. 34-59.

[7]Nicholas Vardac, From Stage to Screen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949); and John L. Fell, "Dissolves by Candlelight," Film Quarterly, Vol. XXIII, No. 3, 1970, pp. 22-34.

[8]See R.G. McLaughlin, Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction (New York: Arno Press, 1974); Jack Poggi, Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968); Frank Rahill, The World of Melodrama (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967).

[9]Albert F. McLean, American Vaudeville as Ritual (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

[10]As an example, in my own research I have found the Pittsburgh Survey material, dating from 1909-1912, to be very useful. There are detailed accounts of the role of moving pictures in the lives of the people of the small mill towns surrounding Pittsburgh.

[11]William Healy, The Individual Delinquent (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1916).

[12]Urban historians have indicated an interest in the role of various forms of mass communication, particularly as it would affect the development of "social bonding" within the urban community. See Richard Meier, A Communications Theory of Urban Growth (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1962).

[13]Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters: Building an Audience for the Movies," A.F.I. Report, May, 1973, pp. 4-8.

[14]For more information on the legal development of municipal motion picture ordinances see Sonya Levien, "New York's Motion Picture Law," The American City, October, 1913, pp. 319-321.

[15]For details on the history of early motion picture advertising see Robert Grau, The Theatre of Science (New York: Benjamin Blom Inc., 1969, first published, 1914), pp. 232-253.

[16]Timothy Lyons, The Silent Partner: The History of the American Film Manufacturing Company (New York: Arno Press, 1974).

[17]Raymond Fielding, "Hale's Tours: Pre-1910 Motion Picture," The Smithsonian Journal of History, Vol. 3, 1968-1969, pp. 101-124.

[18]For interesting local studies of the type I have suggested see Joseph H. North, The Early Development of the Motion Picture, 1887-1909 (New York: Arno Press, 1973), pp. 62-66 which discusses the movies in the city of Ithaca, New York. See also an early study, Ray Leroy Short, "A Study of the Motion Picture," (unpublished M.A. thesis, Iowa State University, 1916), which discusses the introduction of the movies into Iowa City.

[19]There are several useful books on content analysis. The best for beginners are O.R. Holsti, Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1969); and T.F. Carney, Content Analysis (Winnipeg: The University of Alberta Press, 1972).